

*“So what? You're another person, so of course you look different. What do you need to be ashamed for?” -Yana Toboso-*

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Debriefing took the rest of James' night. At some point while he sat in the briefing warehouse going over details, mercifully, someone brought him coffee and ibuprofen. He'd *known*, from their testing experience, that after he gave back the borrowed power from everyone else, he'd still be sore as hell. But it was one thing to remember it, and another to experience it all over again.

It was when he was comparing what he'd seen with one of the observer rogues that Davis had jogged back in from where he'd vanished to early in the meeting and handed James a small glass bottle. He'd gleefully downed the exercise potion, and finally, combined with the painkiller and caffeine, his muscles stopped trying to turn into angry knots.

The rogues had stuck around for a while after he'd vanished, and Nate had dispatched a few more besides them. Keeping an eye on the mostly-abandoned apartment building, tailing the police who left, and trying to track down where the woman who wore Camille's face had gone. None of them were particularly successful; the woman was worrying good at vanishing for someone in full plate armor, the police had just seamlessly faded back into the city on normal routines like nothing had happened, and the building had gone on like nothing had happened.

Until two minutes later when a group of passing pedestrians stumbled on the body of the cop on the pavement, and called 911. And then EMTs and police swarmed the site like they had no idea that there had just been thirty officers there not even an hour ago.

The rogues gave their reports to Nate, James gave his report to Nate, then everyone had questions. Sarah started making notes on the over abundance of proper nouns they were starting to have to cope with. Those notes, along with printouts of memory images and other documentation, then started getting stuck to one of their giant standing whiteboards with magnets. Then connected with lines of marker, with more notes scribbled around them.

By the time James realized they were making a conspiracy board, it was too late, and he was emotionally invested in it.

“Okay. Here's the shape of it!” Sarah said, and started pointing to different things with the pen she was wielding like a magic wand. “New York City!” A tap of the cap of the pen, then a trailing motion to the next point in the web. “Killings. Not ongoing, as far as we know?” She said it with a questioning tone, and got an affirmative nod from Nate. “So they happened, then stopped. But following the trail leads toooooo...” Tap. “Trap rooms! Which has something to do with both a local gang, and also the NYPD, because they both show up sometimes when we poke our noses in. And *this* trap leads us to this next part.”

“The part where someone tried to hit me with a mace.” James said, helpfully.

“Yes thank you!” Sarah brandished her pen at him. “Also, I know Nate told you already, but I wanted to add that even / think it was a good idea not to try to bring her back here. And I’m *me*.” Sarah said. “I don’t want anyone who can kill the whole building in the building unless they’re already our friend. Anyway! Time for some proper noun soup! The woman looked like Camille, right?”

James nodded. “Exactly like her. Like, *exactly*. Same face, same voice, everything.”

Sarah nodded and adopted a narrator’s voice. “Camille, first encountered in Townton during the attack there, is the ‘daughter’ of the Last Line Of Defense. Now, Lloyd is part of a type of individual that we’ve only ever seen a couple of. James, you’ve talked before about The Right Person At The Right Time, who actually gave you a name, and we *think* that the thing we call the Old Gun is one of those too.”

“Oh, it’s entirely possible that the Chain Breaker is her.” James said. “No confirmation there, but not-Cam *did* say that name with the same cadence, and ‘fucking around while people die’ sounds like what the Old Gun was doing around here. And every other time she’s been active.”

With a grunt of annoyance, Nate spoke up. “We’re not gonna connect those yet. Only confirmed intel on the board for now.”

“Sure.” James nodded. “But we’re gonna need to know her epithet eventually. And I’m gonna be optimistic and say there can’t be *too* many of them wandering around.”

“Don’t be optimistic here.” Nate shook his head.

“Speaking of being optimistic!” Sarah cheerfully drowned any hope of optimism with a smile that was almost manic. “Not-Cam also started to say *another* name, James. When she was bleeding to apparently-not-death. Remember?”

“Yeah. She was talking about being betrayed by ‘Long’. Someone Chinese? Long is a Chinese name, right?” James asked. Then the coffee that was helping his brain form lateral connections kicked in. “Wait, no. She cut herself off, didn’t she? She means another one of *them*.”

“Pillars.” Nate grunted again. “It’s the kind of vague word that could mean a lot. Is that how they refer to a type of person, a rank, or membership in an organization? No way to know. But it’s probably the first or second, and I’m preferencing ‘type of person’, because it’s simplest. Rank would require an ongoing schism that has been lasting at least since the showdown at Townton, and with what people like Lloyd are throwing around, I doubt it would have lasted very long.” James started to raise a hand, opening his mouth to ask a question, when Nate cocked a thick finger at him. “Not their fight, their group. If your schism goes on for more than a month,

you don't keep all calling yourself by the same rank, you split off into new cells or something. Happens all the time with insurgency groups." He clarified.

"Oh fuck me." James said suddenly, slapping his forehead. One of the rogues that had been close to dozing off bolted upright in his seat, while Sarah just stared at him with raised eyebrows. James gave an apologetic wave to the guy he'd startled, and met Sarah's eyes. "Long." He said. "I just got it."

She tilted her head at him. "That he's one of their pillars?"

"No. Well, yes. But also, *no one* wants to use the whole epithet every time! We won't even say Last Line! We just clip it to Lloyd, and we *certainly* don't say the 'the' at the start."

"Yeah, because it's a pain." Sarah nodded. "Which is what Not-Cam did?"

"Right! And I'll bet you a *lot* of money that she was shortening The Long Arm Of The Law!" James said, pointing at the spot on the board that Sarah had left as a blank circle.

There were groans from the others in the warehouse. "Oh god *dammit!*" Nate uttered. "Yin already said the cops moved like the ones in Utah! It's the same fucker! That also explains the theme. Obviously there's no way to know how, but if these things work like some of the infomorphs do, then something named *that* is obviously gonna have power over the cops."

Sarah turned from where she'd finished writing the name on the board in red lines with the small squeaks of dry erase marker. "So, four 'pillars'. Chain Breaker, Long Arm Of The Law, Right Person At The Right Time, and Last Line Of Defense." She paused. "And maybe the Old Gun, whatever her name really is. So two big questions. What *are* they, and what are they doing killing people in New York?"

"First off, I don't think they're killing people." James said. "Not-Cam was pretty clear that she thought that Chainy is just using it as cover. That doesn't mean there's not some nonsense going on."

"They clearly think that they're important." One of the rogues spoke up, and James realized he'd only ever heard Ben's *voice* before. Now he paired the name to the face of the late thirties guy with the goatee and shiny bald head. "No one calls themselves a 'pillar' because they lack self-esteem."

"Oh Christ, one of them is gonna monologue to James about 'holding up civilization' at some point, aren't they?" Nate rolled his eyes. "This must be what Cassandra felt like."

James snickered. "I mean, they might - okay, nice Greek myth reference, I appreciate that - they might be more about holding back entropy or something? But yeah, Nate's probably right. That sounds like something that I should prepare some witty retorts for."

“Okay, but what do they *do*?” Sarah reiterated. “Is there any indication they aren’t just really old delvers? I don’t actually remember many details from that time one of them nearly killed me.”

There was a somewhat awkward silence at that. It didn’t last long, because Nate wasn’t the kind of person who was interested in being awkward. “The only thing we really know, from everything anyone has told *me*, is that they actually cannot enter dungeons.” He said. “The Old Gun bugged out when the Sewer came back, Lloyd wouldn’t go near Townton, the... other one, the one James and Anesh talked to in a dream... in addition to making me sound like a fucking lunatic, also wouldn’t show up except in a dream. Plus the Old Gun was using a proxy to do something with the other dungeon in Texas we never got access to.”

“The chemical plant, right?” Sarah asked, making a list of incidents on the side of the board.

“Right. None of us were prepared to fight the Wolfpack over it.” Nate nodded. Then he glanced at the door, arms folded. “We should maybe go check on that. Could be a way to open communications with them, if we know a place they’re stationary. Otherwise there’s not much of a way to get them to talk to us, and they didn’t exactly leave a number to call after Utah.”

“Okay. So, check up on that.” James ordered Nate without realizing he was giving an order. “So we know what the pillars can’t do. And we know that the Right Person is... trapped? Or at least asked us for help. Not that we have *any* way to help, or even know where to start.” He rubbed at his temple, taking a deep breath as he split his focus to watch a delve team come into the room.

It was weird to remember that while they were trying to figure out how to catch a bunch of assassins, and also deal with the existential threat of whatever the pillars represented, that the Order just... kept going. Other people had their own adventures going on. And James found himself getting slightly distracted with a small smile as he watched the three humans, one camraconda, and one growing paper dragon dump backpacks full of extracted magical wealth onto an open table and shed cold weather gear as they escaped the frigid cold of Winter’s Climb.

He refocused on what Sarah was saying, and realized it was more of what they’d been talking about. That they’d reached the part of the conversation where they were going in circles.

It was a feeling he’d become familiar with, dealing with this New York thing. They just didn’t know enough. And every attempt to gain information had just lead to a dead end, or a fight.

Though that did cause him to think of something suddenly. “Hey.” James said suddenly, interrupting Sarah’s conversation loop about the pillars. “Why... why was Not-Cam there?” He asked. “Like, she *said* she was there doing Lloyd-stuff, or whatever. ‘Outside influence’ is almost certainly dungeon things, knowing how Lloyd talked. But what was she doing *there*?” James emphasized the word. “The *cops* were the trap. The apartment was basically empty,

just cloaked. So... why was she there? What, actually, are the odds that we'd bump into each other?"

He was specifically thinking of how, when they'd gone to meet an Alchemist in that strip mall in Utah. Of how the old woman who'd been there had referenced what the kids did as something that messed with *fate*.

Was fate real? James lived in a world where a lot of weird things were real. But he wasn't sure he was prepared to deal with actual fate. Officium Mundi screwing with causality to expedite Amazon orders was one thing - and as one thing it was bad enough, really - but some force that rearranged the universe for *narrative convenience* legitimately terrified James. It felt like he was perched on the edge of an endless void, staring down at the secret answer that nothing he did mattered.

Fate probably wasn't real, he reasoned. Vampires weren't real, after all. Just because the dungeons made *some* weird things didn't mean every weird thing humans had ever made up was also real. The weirdness they had to deal with was finite, and bounded.

But that did still leave the question of why the woman who looked like Camille had been there at the same time he was.

"Frequency, probably." Nate answered, unaware of James' internal turmoil.

"She's not involved in this." James raised an eyebrow. "Also how would she be involved in this?"

Nate flipped him off with a casual glower. "We've been poking these hidden places. She's been poking these hidden places. There's only so many of them, and we're doing it at the same time. So, it's likely we bump into each other." He spread his hands. "It doesn't have to be magic. It's the same thing as with Townton. The reason we're always in the place where we can do something is because we can do a lot, and we keep sticking our asses into every random place where trouble might be happening."

"I don't..." James started to question Nate's phrasing, but Sarah got to it first.

"We don't *stick our asses* into things, Nate. Please! There are children present." She admonished him.

The chef briefly looked around them. "No there aren't."

Sarah grinned and arched her eyebrows. "Poor James is going to learn all sorts of-"

“Alright.” James slapped his knees and stood up easily. Easily enough that the lack of pains and aches actually startled him. “We’re basically out of anything that I have to add to this.” He announced. “Oh, wait, no! Sarah! Make a note on the board that Not-Camille got shot!”

“Yeah, you shot her *repeatedly*.” Sarah said quietly. “It... didn’t work. But also...” She trailed off, not looking at James.

James felt something in his chest sting, and resolved to talk to Sarah later. But right now, he shook his head. “No, I mean, when the cop shot her, that actually worked. Bracer deflected it, but her magical invincible armor didn’t. Just... I don’t know what it means, but it might be important.”

“Oh! Okay!” The marker squeaked on the whiteboard, and was followed by a tap as Sarah snapped the cap back on. “Anything else?”

“Nope. I’m basically out of thoughts.” James nodded at Nate. “You need anything else from me?”

“Yes. We do need to contact McHarn, if we’re going to pretend to be working with the bureau.” Nate said. “Also, at some point, I *would* like to know what the bullets he gave us do.”

“I’ll put JP on the first one. And you should talk to Research about the bullets. See if they have an iLipede for it.” James said. “For now, I’m gonna go grab some food and avoid contact with people for a while until I feel less overwhelmed and exhausted.” He told them.

Nate nodded once then went back to talking to the people he’d had doing various scouting around the area. Sarah nodded a few times, shooting him a thumbs up before she went back to trying to add as many details to their conspiracy board as possible.

James went out of the room, taking a breath of the comparatively fresher air of the front lobby of the Lair. Trying to put together how he was going to get his brain to calm down and his muscles to untense. Because yeah, the debriefing had been calm, but he was still coasting on a kind of weird mental state where he felt like he was dodging and parrying, even as he answered normal questions from his friends. The wisdom coffee also helped.

And now, he was starting to crash. And the fact that he’d just been in a decidedly one sided fight with a woman who had nearly killed him sort of crashed down. He couldn’t get the image of the man she’d struck down out of his head; one half-assed strike had cratered a human body, and she had *not* been half-assing her attacks at James.

Then she’d fallen from a seventh floor window. And gotten up. And *ran away*.

James found his breath catching and his hands shaking. He clenched his fingers into fists, opening and closing them as he tried to push away the perfectly well earned anxiety. It wasn’t

just that he'd watched someone die in a blink. It was just that he'd almost died too. And while that was becoming a familiar feeling, there was something weird about it when it was from a much more deliberate action. It reminded him a little too much of the assault on Status Quo, in terms of how his brain was processing it.

And the memory of the aftereffects of *that* fight still gave him nightmares.

"Planner, we're still... hidden, right?" James whispered into the air.

The assignment, always present around the Lair, woven into the minds of about fifty different members of the Order, replied almost instantly. A thin noise like a pen on dry paper sounding near James' shoulder as the infomorph spoke. "Yes. An appointment is needed to find the building. Much of my capacity goes toward that. Though the caveat makes it easier to hold up."

"Thank you." James murmured softly, and really meant it.

"Of course." The scribed voice said, as Planner faded back to wherever their main body was.

James exhaled. Pressed his eyes shut. Then nodded to himself, tried to push his shoulders down, then opened his eyes and started moving.

Food first. Then some personal time. Then, he was sure, he could figure out the rest tomorrow.

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The Research department was as chaotic as ever. James passed by two people running through a series of basic magic tests with a bucket full of pens and pencils, ducked under some kind of hopefully-contained high-wind weather event, dodged out of the way as a researcher sprinted past chasing the hyperactive iLipede that had scuttled by on the wall, stopped to pet a shellaxy that had gotten free from its pen, briefly paused to answer survey questions from someone writing a report on infomorphs, dodged the same researcher chasing the same iLipede that was now joined by a friend but going the other direction, and told three people that he wasn't the one in charge of their budget.

This happened across about five minutes, and was more or less the gauntlet that he'd gotten used to running every time Reed said he needed to talk to him. James was considering just giving Research, as a department, the whole building that Officium Mundi was in. Technically, their lease on the space had started, but people weren't really using it for anything yet. Even if it did have more space to work with, there was just something *about* the Lair that felt comfortable to a lot of the long time members of the Order of Endless Rooms.

And it wasn't just the green orbs they'd stacked up here. It was, for a lot of them, their homes. The first place they'd been after being plucked from the grip of death, the place they'd healed and grown and learned and made friends and built something.

They had a new building now. And it even had a dungeon in it, which was truly exciting. But that was a building for a new group of people to learn and grow and build something in. At least, until James pried Research out of the basement they were rapidly outgrowing and transplanted them.

“James! Hey!” Reed greeted him with an absent tone that made it seem like he’d utterly forgotten that he’d asked James down here in the first place as James knocked on the door to the close that Reed called an office. “How’s it going?”

“It’s alright.” James said, stifling a yawn. He’d had a long day yesterday, had only just woken up, and was already feeling the mental effects of the disruption to his ‘schedule’. “You look like you forgot you asked me down here.” He accused without any fire to the words.

“No!” Reed protested rapidly. “I remembered!” And in a quieter voice he probably didn’t think James could hear, added, “I remembered as soon as you knocked.” James just hummed at him, biting his lip to hold back a smirk, as Reed ticked through the sticky notes on a line of black rectangular cases he had on the end of his desk. “Ah, here!” He said, pulling out one marked ‘James’ and handing it to James. “For you, James.” He said.

“That *is* my name, for now.” James nodded, taking the case. “What do I do with it?”

“I mean, usually you tell people what it is so they know what to call you in the-“

“What do I do *with the case* you dingus.” James rolled his eyes, but in a friendly way. He was a bit exasperated, but he was awake enough now that this wasn’t too stressful. He’d gotten some good sleep, and it helped that Sarah had flicked a small nap at him earlier too.

“Oh! Open it and use the orb, then tell me what you got.” Reed said. “Now, if you’re not too busy.”

“Sure.” James snorted and clicked open the hard plastic latches with a resounding *snap*. Inside, rolled to the bottom corner of the otherwise empty container, a single small yellow orb set. “You know I’ve already got a million of these and have trouble finding uses for them, right?” He asked. “What’s this one do?”

“You tell me.” Reed said, glowering at James who was apparently stalling. But then James huffed in amusement and cracked the orb between his fingers.

[+1.3 Skill Ranks : Medical - Veterinary - Hedgehog]

“Oh, interesting.” James said with raised eyebrows. “This was a size one?” He asked.

“Yep!” Reed said. “One skill rank. Why?”



“Because I got one point three.” James said. “So, thirty percent more than normal? You think this is a result of the Library orb for hedgehogs?”

“Sure do.” Reed nodded. “We’ve done a few tests, with the orbs, and just normally. It’s really hard to quantify it without the fiat-backed orb numbers, but it works for *any* learning. It might also work for working with the animals, but that’s even harder to measure, and we haven’t started controlled testing yet.”

James nodded, pouring over thoughts of hedgehog biology and proper vaccinations and treatments for them as pets. Then he paused, and pushed at a different thought that had crept up on him. The thought of his Akashic Sewer lesson, the ongoing boost he got for learning more about biology. The one he’d gotten up to just before the line of the next upgrade, before he’d cracked an orb that gave him quite a bit of biology knowledge.

In a blink, he was somewhere else. A classroom with overturned desks and scarred floors. Broken windows that led to a blasted red sky over an exterior basketball court. Tiny insects scuttled around his feet. At the blackboard, three words sat, and the Teacher screamed at him to make a choice.

James picked Endurance again, putting him at the third rank of it. Because it had kept him alive through impossible odds several times, and he saw no reason to switch to something like Toxicity at this point when this was already working more than perfectly.

And he was back, hearing the echoes of his syllabus in his head.

Lesson Continues : Biology IV (96/4200)

James let out a breath, then sucked in air deeper than he had before. His lung capacity just a little larger, his arms a little less sore. He wasn’t *enduring* right now, so the effects weren’t on full display, but he felt *good*.

“Well that’s handy.” He said. “This is also really cool. This means the Library orbs would be a lot safer to give to kids, right? Compared to the Office ones.”

Reed nodded slowly. “I mean, it seems like it?” He leaned forward on his desk, a finger curling his hair in thought. “It doesn’t give you anything except faster learning, and maybe some other perks, so it wouldn’t, like, overwhelm anyone too young. You could *probably* give it to a baby with no bad results? But that seems like a weird thing to test.”

“I’m glad you don’t need me to tell you not to test that. These days, at least.”

“I’m learning!” Reed exclaimed, a little defensively. “Anyway. What’re you up to today? I’ve got a shift doing some potion restocking in a half hour or so, if you wanna learn how to do that with

me.” He looked at James hopefully. The process of harvesting and processing the slightly sticky fruit from the tree was easy. Doing it from the succulents that the Order had started growing - all eighty of them, now - was *far* less simple, and having a helper would be welcome.

James gave a nod from his tilted head, lips pursed. “Yeah, it actually would be cool to learn how to make some of the potions, just in case. I feel like if I’m gonna lean into my role as omnipresent problem solver, I should be adept at as many things as I can. But I’m also going to the nonhuman support group meeting in, like... also half an hour. Answering questions and stuff, talking about the future.”

“Ah.” Reed nodded in understanding, then paused. “So, you’ve got half an hour free...” he trailed off.

“You *really* want help with this, don’t you?”

“Pleeeeeeease?” Reed turned puppy dog eyes on James.

There was a long pause while James really thought about how dedicated he was to his role as problem solver. Then he gave a brief sigh. “Alright, but I’m going to the thing, so let’s get going.”

“Yessss.” Reed hopped his desk in an instant, nearly kicking James and moving with an agility that looked out of place on his somewhat chubby frame. He was out the door with a relieved look on his face before James could protest whatever he’d gotten himself into.

James just shook his head with a resigned smile, and followed down the halls to where the room full of magical plant pots was. At least he’d learn how to do this part, and Reed seemed happy enough, which *did* matter to James. Though he wondered what had happened to Reed’s lab coat; the Researcher was just wearing a normal polo shirt today, and it looked out of place on him.

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The community meeting took place in one of the new apartments.

Not every apartment was occupied. Mark and Bill and their growing crew of specialists had done an amazing job of hooking up water and power, and everyone who moved in had gotten a budget of ‘whatever, basically’ in order to furnish their spaces. A lot of Response members, especially the ones who were either trying to get away from their families, or who had lost families to begin with, had taken the offer of free rent. A *lot* of Recovery also lived here now. And a chunk of the complex apartments were of course occupied by the growing population of camracondas and ratroaches as well.

The apartment they were in now wasn't anyone's in particular. It was a community space, which had basically been set aside for this exact get together, and also for some of the kids who were around the Lair to hang out and play video games in without having to get too close to whatever existential threat the Research basement was up to that day. There were several couches in the living room, and a richly textured coffee table in the middle of them. A few cloth tapestries on the walls, and the smell of flavored smoke from the candles on the kitchen counter.

The space was large enough for quite a few people, which was good, because even though the meetings weren't always large, there was always someone who was exploring them for the first time. Enough that the support group was considering a second meeting at some point, so they didn't start to overflow the room and talk over each other. But for now, the new apartment was large enough, and comfortable, and afterward James could challenge people to games of Super Smash Bros with the console that the kids used.

James was helping set up, right now. There were a few camracondas on one of the couches, a ratroach sitting with her back to the corner of the room, another ratroach helping him move an armchair into position, one of the potion people - an inhabitant, James reminded himself - setting a bowl of pretzels on the table, and a knock at the door as more people trickled in.

And eventually, they sat down to just... talk.

That's all this meeting was. Something small, but so important. The nonhumans who had no context always had questions about the world, all of them, James included, had questions about their place in things, and all of them also had personal experiences to share that the group was well suited to empathizing with.

"I learned this week," Texture-Of-Barkdust said, "that the 'Christ' that some people thank sometimes, is a *person*, and not an *object*."

On the couch, sitting between Smoke, who had been coaxed out of the corner and was currently pressed into the new corner of the couch, Bea, who was stoically staring straight ahead of herself, and Rufus, who had taken up a position on the back of the sofa right next to James' head, James tensed up at the mention of religion, and wondered if he could somehow sink into the couch cushions before anyone asked him a question about it.

Rufus jabbed him in the back of the head with a pen leg. Not too hard, but enough to remind him that he wasn't allowed to run away from uncomfortable questions. "What kind of object did you think a christ was?" Arrush asked from one of the other couches. It was the kind of line that James would have said with a laugh in his voice; not *mocking*, but *playful* at least. The big ratroach said it entirely earnestly, with mild curiosity as he peered with his mismatched eyes at the camraconda across the room from him.

Texture-Of-Barkdust gave a hissing hum of considered thought. "I had not speculated. A tool of some kind, perhaps? A good luck charm?" She turned her head to silently look at Smoke as

the new ratroach held up her white board, with the word "Food" written on it in block letters. "Yes, food would also work. Or a food source! Renewable food would be a suitable miracle to thank." Texture-Of-Barkdust nodded at Smoke, who fractionally untensed as she gave an agreeing twitch of a claw toward the camraconda.

Renewable food, to a ratroach, would be *beyond* magic. The ones that were new from the Akashic Sewer often broke down crying when they learned that they didn't have to wait to eat, or worry about their next meal.

"So..." James started to say slowly, "*technically*, you're not far off? Okay, I should explain something really quick."

"You say that every time, and your explanations are often rambling tangents that are not at all quick." Scent-Of-Rain accused him.

"Okay, I'll *try* to explain quick." James smiled at her. "So, humans have been doing the religion thing for a long time. Is anyone here *not* familiar with religion, as a concept?" Everyone indicated that they were at least up to date on that, in some way. "Okay. So, I'm not religious. Despite the fact that I often slip their terminology into my language. So when I talk about this kind of thing, I'm approaching it as, like, *mythology*, and not history. And that can actually come across as really offensive to people who do legitimately believe in it."

"Which is it?" Texture-Of-Barkdust asked abruptly.

"...between myth or history?" James asked, and the camraconda gave a bobbing nod. "Uh... well, that depends on if you're asking a believer or not. Historically, it seems like someone named Christ, or something like it, did exist at one point, and wrote some philosophy texts. But the other parts of the myth, like, for example, the part where he duplicated food," James nodded at Smoke as he said that part, "don't fit with what we know about reality."

"You duplicate food on a regular basis." Bea said, the inhabitator having fully dropped the mask of humanity that the potion people sometimes wore when they were around too many new faces. She spoke with a voice that wasn't *empty*, exactly, but it was the wrong tone for the body she was wearing, and it didn't vibrate with the warmth of a real human voice. "How do you know the historical figure did not have a similar power?"

"Which is a good point, yeah." James nodded. "There's a big ongoing debate, that I think a few of you might have been caught up in, to assign dungeon magic effects to all the myths of human legends. Dragons? We see dragons all the time. Heroes? We have a building full of them. What's a miracle or two here or there?" He shrugged. "But that can also feel really reductive. It dismisses the creative agency of a lot of storytellers, by assuming that there's no such thing as fiction. Also, it makes a *massive* assumption about the validity of things from sources we can't verify and shouldn't trust."

“So, the religious believe things they cannot verify, and everyone else does not?” Arrush asked.

“They would be offended if you said it that way, but yes.” James said. “And I am, honestly, trying to not be a jerk to people who believe things, as long as those things aren’t causing problems.”

“We have a question.” Watcher-Of-Motion spoke up from where he was conferring with his two other camraconda friends. James indicated that he should go ahead, and the camraconda hissed politely at him. “What is the benefit of belief in a specific myth?”

“Like, a religion?” James asked for clarification. “Well, generally, people use it as a kind of source of emotional and spiritual fulfillment, I think. Like, the stories and songs are meaningful to them, and they like the community. For people who are having trouble, I *think* it’s a source of direction in their lives? Again, I am not religious, so I can’t...”

“The last owner of this body was raised religious.” Bea said, the inhabitor moving forward with mechanical precision, taking a pretzel, and balancing it on her finger as she sat back. “She did not find it to be that way. There are many, *many* unhappy thoughts about her religion as a form of oppression.”

“Yeah, and this is why I’m trying not to talk about it in solid terms.” James said, tapping his nose before pointing at the potion girl. “Because the experience is *not* positive for a lot of people, and religious attitudes and power structures *do* hurt a *looooot* of people. But actually talking about them that way causes pushback from the faithful that is unconstructive, and so I try to be as polite as possible. Even if, personally, I would agree with you.”

“I also have experience with faith.” Arrush whispered. On the couch next to James, Smoke snapped her eyes over to the larger ratroach as he spoke, and from the big armchair, Banana curled in on herself as her functional eye also silently tracked Arrush’s movements. “Didn’t think of it as the same as religion, but...” he shrugged with some of his arms, mimicking James’ favorite gesture. “We were told... often told... that causing pain was holy. That our god loved it when we killed. That being hated was a sign of... of...”

He trailed off, and James felt an overwhelming urge to go hug the big guy. Small tears were forming in the ratroach’s many eyes, but he blinked them back as his clawed paws formed into tense fists. Next to him on the couch, Carlos, the other inhabitor in the room, gave a rapid set of angular nods. “I understand.” He said in the same empty voice that didn’t really make use of the body he was in. “Not being told what to do, but being told what I am. We have had to take it on faith, that we can be something else.”

Bea nodded once at him. “Maybe that is what it is. Reflection of the unfounded belief that we can be better.”

"I *can* be better, though." Texture-Of-Barkdust said with a hissing intake of air. The camraconda swung her body around to point her snout at Arrush. "You didn't need someone else to tell you that you were doing better, did you?"

"...No?" The big ratroach hissed, some of his paws clenched tightly around his arms.

Texture-Of-Barkdust nodded, and James joined her as he saw where she was going with this. "Yes. You see? It is easy to miss why some people have a need to believe, when we already have faith. Ours simply looks different, because it is in ourselves."

"And each other, really." James added quietly, the one human voice in the room standing out. "I know I'm supposed to just be here to answer questions..."

"No one cares. Speak." Scent-Of-Rain said with a laughing hiss.

James snorted and made a face at her, but did actually feel some of his worry fade away. "I just... I know how it feels to not know what you're doing, and not really believe in yourself, but to have friends around that you're willing to do better for. I don't really believe in myself that much, but I've got people who I care about who I can do better for. And yeah, it *does* feel fulfilling, and I think Texture's right. I can easily see why someone without that would search for a way to fill that gap, and I don't even mean that in a rude way. Just that it seems perfectly *alive* to want to try."

A soft quiet fell over the room, before Arrush looked up at James with mostly cleared eyes. "Thank you." The tan furred ratroach whispered, wiping the sleeve of his sacrificial hoodie on the corners of his eyes.

Then they spent ten minutes patiently trying to decipher the motions of Rufus, who claimed the coffee table to sign to them a story about how he was once part of a group that tried to kill a god, and James realized that he maybe didn't know as much about Rufus as he thought. Either that or Rufus was just a very good storyteller.

As every got comfortable, or at least, as comfortable as the newer Sewer life forms could be, there was an awkward moment where Arrush got James' attention to ask a question, but then withered slightly as everyone turned to look at him. "Take your time!" James offered, grabbing a cashew out of a bowl in the center of the table. "None of us are in a hur- none of us except Texture-Of-Barkdust are in a hurry."

Arrush nodded, and took a deep breath, emulating a behavior he'd often seen from James. "I am curious." He said. "Maybe... maybe someone knows. I have been having some trouble with the smaller humans..."

"Ah. The small ones that ask for rides?" Watcher-Of-Motion asked. "I understand. They are heavier than they think."

“Nnnnnno. No?” Arrush tilted his triangular head, antenna dancing against his fur at the quick motion. “They do not ask me for rides...”

“They would, if you were around. They will ask anyone, I think.” The camraconda mused.

“...But you did mean them, did you?”

“No.” Arrush confirmed. “I meant... the older ones. The ones who survived their school being attacked by the place that made me.” He made a tiny gesture toward Smoke and Banana, the wasp girl flinching backward into her chair at the gesture. “Made us. But these humans. They are cruel. Nothing, *nothing*, like what I... what we... they are not *bad*. But they say things that hurt, and do small things that hurt. And two of them have apologized and are trying to be better, but... but...”

Rufus hopped off the coffee table and onto Arrush’s lap, the stapler butting his head against the ratroach’s chest, while next to him, the inhabitator actually looked uncertain as he reached out a hand and gently set in on Arrush’s shoulder. “You... okay?” Banana asked in a tiny, cracked, buzz of a voice, even the girl who was terrified of Arrush looking at him sympathetically.

“No.” He said, but he sighed again and continued. “None of that is important. I wanted to ask *why*. Why are some of the humans, especially the younger ones... bad? Why are they... why are they...?”

“Why are humans assholes?” James asked, finishing his sentence. Arrush nodded. “Ugh.” James grunted, but found a small smile as Arrush started idly petting Rufus. “That’s sorta tough to answer, but I do actually sorta know already. Okay, so, look around the room.” He swept an arm at them. “Camracondas. Trapped for years and slowly dying. Inhabitators. On the run from their creators, paranoid for their whole lives about being found. Ratroaches and... Banana.” The girl perked up at her name. “Forced to hurt others to survive. Everyone here has... yes, Rufus, you too. Okay, Rufus; apparently attempted diacide, and also lost a lot of friends doing it. So *everyone here* has been through some kind of horrible trauma. And... it changes you. Changes *us*. Trauma like that can make you afraid, make you lash out, make you angry without understanding *why*. Does that sound familiar?”

“I froze Nate in place several times when he brought me food.” Watcher-Of-Motion admitted in a low-volume tone, the camraconda shrinking back into the couch.

“We still do not often... talk to others.” Bea said, voice still empty and stilted, but with a rhythmic pause in the middle of her words.

Smoke held up her whiteboard, the words ‘tried to bite someone’ written on it in shaky letters. Her body language tensed like she was prepared to run out of the room if anyone reacted.

James just nodded, understanding. “And then what?” No one answered, they just looked around, at him and each other. “Did anything happen? Like, anything *bad*?”

Slowly, Arrush shook his head. “When I... when I made mistakes. In the dead city. They would talk to me, or give me space, or... or... there was always *someone*. Somehow.” He looked at James. “Do you know JP?”

“He’s one of my friends from before ‘all this’.” James motioned around his head with an open hand. “And yeah, he’s... he’s kinder than he lets on. And *this is what I’m getting at*.” James tapped the coffee table. “Everyone is shaped by our personal trauma. But we can also be shaped by how we heal. You know why there aren’t any camracondas who are real assholes? It’s this. It’s because we’re here to have a place where everyone can confront and cope with their hurts, without being afraid, or angry, or hurt worse. And... and those kids haven’t had that.” James sighed, deeply. “They’ve been *human* their whole lives. Normal human kids in the normal human United States. They’ve got ten to twenty years of experience with a culture that punishes them for hurting, even if that’s not how we actually talk about it and no one will admit that’s true. *You all* have one to three years of experience in a culture that’s focused on being better than that.”

“I like this culture.” Scent-Of-Rain muttered from the couch.

“There is a strange disconnect between what the old owner of this body would have felt, and what I, now, think.” Bea said, staring at the back of her hand, occasionally flipping her hand over with a snap of motion. “That she would have said you were fools. But she is not here, and I am, and I cannot argue that you are wrong when I... feel otherwise?” Her voice changed, shifting from empty monotone to a warble with her last two words. Nothing much, but a hint of something different as she looked up at James with a blank face.

He shrugged, smiling at her before turning back to Arrush. “Anyway, that’s why some humans are assholes. And why a lot of the people around the Order are less so than outside of it. Not that there aren’t amazing people across the world, but we’re specifically building a place to let that attitude flourish, so I’m hoping we’ll have a higher concentration of kindness around here.”

“Mmh.” Arrush nodded raptly at James, then flinched a tiny bit when James met his eyes and he realized he was staring, looking away quickly. “Understanding is also easier, when you can... connect directly.”

“It’s true!” James nodded. “Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask! Is there anyone who doesn’t have a skulljack, but would like one? I know all of you have them,” he shot a nod to the camracondas, “but, like, Smoke, if you’re having trouble speaking, it can be a good option if you don’t want to... oh.” He gave a sad frown at the big X she’d drawn on her white board. “Okay. That’s alright too.” He said. “Honestly, we have *more* than enough capability to support anyone who needs extra help. Like, we don’t have a minimum capability to participate or anything. I just thought I’d ask.”



“You are always asking how you can help us.” Scent-Of-Rain said. “It is very kind. But also you are allowed to worry less.”

“He won’t.” Arrush said, face stretching into a fanged visage that he sheepishly covered when his smile seemed to make the other ratroach shrink back into her corner of the couch. Arrush continued, his humor somewhat stifled, but still trying. “I know. Worrying is *comfortable*.”

“Ouch! But also correct. But also ouch.” James said. “Anyway, I wanted to loop back to the earlier point. That we have fewer people who lash out here, just because our approach is intentionally designed to let everyone recover from their traumas, and learn to be better, without being afraid. And, like, I’m actually glad you brought this up, because it’s *not* something we can just assume people will keep doing without it being pointed out?” He shrugged. “You’re all active participants in our little subculture here, it’s important you know that you can help keep it doing what it’s doing.”

The inhabitants shared minute glances with each other, before focusing on James again. “We do not participate.” Bea said for them. “We are simply present.”

“And yet, here you are.” Texture-Of-Barkdust said with a flick of her tail. “Accepted. And allowed to join when you are comfortable. Which is better than how outside humans have been acting.” She gave an irritated hiss.

“Did... did you want to talk about...” James started, apprehensively eying the other camracondas who had buried their heads in the couch cushions as soon as Texture-Of-Barkdust said that. But it wasn’t the camraconda who cut him off, but Banana

The wasp girl leaned forward, her wings cracking open around her back as she opened her beak while she talked, even if she was using the skulljack and digital speaker to form words. “Yes!” She exclaimed. “Outside humans are strange! They stare, and their blankets are too heavy, and, and...” She cut off speaking as everyone looked at her curiously, freezing up as she was noticed.

“Ooooooh, when Deb took you to the hospital to get an X-ray!” James tilted his head back as he made the connection. “Yeah, the lead coats are weird. I’m sorry if they weren’t polite, though.”

Banana tilted her head sideways in a gesture James didn’t quite know. “One gave me a candy. Deb would not let me eat it.” She was still learning how to put emotion into the digital voice of hers, but James was certain that emotion was ‘disappointed’.

“Deb would not let us eat candy for some time, either.” Arrush said, in the softest voice he could manage. He looked... James didn’t really know how to describe it. He looked like he was both hopeful and terrified at the same time. James followed Arrush’s line of sight over to Banana,

who was listening to the ratroach's words carefully, her sharp gaze relaxing ever so slightly as he talked.

Then suddenly, it clicked in his head. It reminded him of how he'd felt as a teenager, when he'd wanted to be the cool older brother, and his sister had just hated him. Even getting Banana into the same room as Arrush and Smoke had been hard, and the three of them were still perched far apart from each other. But he was trying, so hard, to show that he wasn't going to hurt them, and it broke James' heart to realize it.

Someone said something to him, and he snapped out of his thoughts with a "Hm?" Texture-Of-Barkdust was leaning toward him, saying something, and James focused on her words. "-why there is a focus on humanity in the business sector? Manufacturing, really."

"Oh. Uh." James collected his thoughts. "Like, when you're trying to set up supply line deals with people, why are they asking you questions about your voice or appearance and not, like, shipping things?"

"Yes exactly." The camraconda said.

James pressed his hands together, tapping his fingertips on his nose. "Lemmie ask you something. When your people, the group of camracondas in that tower, were there; did you think you were the only intelligent life around?"

"No." Watcher-Of-Motion said. "Skitterers set traps, the walkers speak, there are others who must think somehow."

"Right. Well, humans don't... *have that?* Not really." James sighed. "I'm probably explaining this badly, in that I'm probably wrong about something. But I *think* that it's mostly because humans have grown up on a planet with only humans that can think and talk. When Barkdust shows up and casually tries to act like this is normal - which it *should be*, don't get me wrong - a lot of people are going to be contending with the utter upending of their worldview and might be too distracted to sign a contract."

"Well, they should be better at business." The surly camraconda muttered.

"I don't disagree. But also, maybe try some followup calls? Maybe they'll be better with time to process it." James suggested. "Also, I'm legitimately surprised no one has tried to go to the press or something with 'aliens offered to sell me platinum', now that I'm thinking about this more."

"I am not an alien." Texture-Of-Barkdust seemed even more irate as she hissed at James.

"Well yeah, but they don't know that." He gave a snort of laughter. "I think the thing that's gonna take some people more time to get used to is the fact that you're all from Earth. You

have a claim to this world, just like us. Don't ever let anyone tell you this place isn't your home, okay?" He looked around at the group.

"Even if we are dangerous?" Bea asked, voice back to the monotone with only a tiny hint of curiosity.

"Especially then. I know this has come up before, but *I* am possibly the most dangerous person in this room." James smiled at them. "Being dangerous doesn't make you less *people*. That's the whole point of stuff like *this*. I wanna be here for you; the whole Order does. We want you all to grow and learn and heal and flourish, so that when the *next* people who need it show up, we can all greet them together."

"That assumes that there will be..." Carlos started to say, before the inhabitant trailed off, empty eyes focused straight ahead as he turned his head to take in the several species in the room. Rufus waved at him. "Ah." He said, the syllable coming out sharp.

James patted him on the shoulder, a gesture that had seemed less awkward in his head than when he did it. "You get used to..." He stopped as his phone beeped. His phone wasn't supposed to beep at all, he'd silenced it for this. Also the beep was a noise he'd literally never heard from it. "Sorry, hang on." He pulled the electronic out and checked the screen.

There was a series of increasingly frantic messages from Nate and JP, all of which had been ignored because he was busy. And then one message in a glowing red box that took up most of his phone's screen that should not be there. "James." It read. "Check your messages. Momo."

"Huh." He said, poking the message. Apparently, Reed had made good on his threat to grow a program that could circumvent the silent status on smartphones, and now James wondered if it worked on airplane mode. The box vanished, and opened his phone to the normal screen the Order's shared chat server. "That... uh... that's weird. Also I need to *go*?"

"Do not let us hold you up." Texture-Of-Barkdust said. "Thank you for joining us today."

"See you... later?" Arrush asked.

James gave him a grin. "Of course." He said, standing and throwing his shoes on quickly. "Everyone play nice!"

He ran out of the room, hopping the railing of the spatially warped apartment complex and dropping on unstable feet to the courtyard below without having crossed much space at all. His heart beat, and he really, *really* hoped this wasn't something worth panicking about.

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“Sup?” James asked as he walked into the briefing warehouse. It looked largely the same as it had yesterday, except for the addition of JP, the replacement of Sarah with Momo, and the fact that Nate looked like he was trying to nap with his eyes open. “I got your message, somehow.”

“Oh good, that worked!” Momo said. “Okay, so... actually, I’m gonna go hand this off to Harvey’s helper squad.” She flipped the phone she was holding in the air and jutted an arm out so that it dropped into the pocket of her robe. “JP can explain.”

James accepted a passing fist bump as Momo shifted her way past the flock of chairs and out the door, before he turned back to JP. “So, again, sup? I was in the middle of a thing.”

“It can wait.” JP said bluntly, kicking the foot of Nate’s chair and getting a start from the other man. “I have a problem for you.”

“I literally just did this.” James said. He didn’t exactly *mean* to sound tired, or upset, or maybe a little petulant. But he realized it was coming across that way as soon as the words left his mouth. “Sorry. I mean, I’ve only been up for a handful of hours, and my legs are still sore, and I’m feeling kinda drained. So, is this an actual thing, or...?”

Grim faced, JP handed him a USB stick along with one of the weird connector things that let James plug it into his brain. He sighed and clipped it into his skulljack, wordlessly prodding at the information inside.

Opening files with his brain was weird, to James. If you were plugged into a laptop or phone or something, it was easy; you just got the OS to do it for you, and then looked at the result. It *felt* strange, because you weren’t really ‘looking’, but basically it was the same as using a computer. But if you were just opening stuff on a USB stick, it was almost impossible to read a .jpg or something, because human brains weren’t computers. It had a texture, sort of, and a color, sort of, and maybe something like what infrared light would taste like, but it wasn’t like James could click on the icon and look at the picture.

Which was why he was glad this wasn’t a normal file. Instead, it was one of the packaged .mem files, something no modern OS would be able to read, but that a human brain could unravel like a puzzle knot into something that felt *comprehensible*.

He did so, and closed his eyes as he slowly brushed his thoughts against it. Feeling out the memory multiple times, to make it stick.

A simple scene. An approach to a rental car, crossing a street. Some asshole guy on a motorcycle cutting past, causing a hop backward to avoid getting hit. A breath, an attempt to not be angry at the biker, but still annoyed with-

Heat and noise. A sharp pain. The world tilted in the wrong direction.

James jerked his head back, then narrowed his eyes, flicking his gaze toward JP before he closed them again and replayed the memory. As slowly as he could. Memories stored with skulljacks were unique to human memories in one critical way; perfect fidelity. They didn't get cluttered and faded with time. Every watch was the first one.

James went through it step by step. Watched the exact moment the car bomb went off, caught the momentary glimpse of part of the door approaching too fast, propelled by a vehicular fireball.

"What the fuck happened?" He asked in a deadly soft voice.

"Someone took a shot at one of our people." Nate said in a voice that sounded like he hadn't slept since James had left him here yesterday. "Notice anything in the replay?"

James heard that voice, and felt like it meant he hadn't noticed the right thing. He played it back again, and again. The woman on the motorcycle caused the distance so the rogue wasn't close to the explosion, the car came apart, the shrapnel hopefully not hurting anyone else on the street. James played it again, looking closely at the faces nearby, looking for anything out of place.

And there it was. A little bit before crossing the street; the guy on the corner, fidgeting with something in his coat. Shooting glances at the car, the rogue had barely seen it out of the corner of their eye, but they *still saw it*, and the memory could be analyzed endlessly to spot the detail. And yeah, as James let it play forward, that guy clearly started moving *before* the bomb went off, clearly did something immediately beforehand too, probably hitting the trigger. He was heading for a car... and that was all that James could tell.

"Who was this?" James was afraid to ask. "Are they okay?"

"Yin." Nate said. "She's alive. Lost a lot of blood, has a concussion, and a perforated lung, and a bunch of other problems. Half of them we have magic to solve, but she's down for a while. Not dead though. And still teleported herself out of there."

"Okay." James hissed the word out. "The guy with the detonator..."

"Bailed out of the city." JP said. "Got the plates from the DMV, the car's a rental, and has a GPS in it. We've got that too. He's heading southwest, EI's tailing him."

"EI? Really?"

"Nate swaps out with her when he naps." JP said, like that made it better. "James, we've got a problem here." He held up a hand before James could say anything snarky, even though James hadn't planned to respond with anything except patient listening. "This guy matches *one* of the killings, but *one guy*? I don't think this is all of it. And I dunno if focusing on this is the right call, if there's still activity in New York."

“And I agree.” Nate said, grabbing one of a dozen cups off the table seemingly at random and downing whatever coffee was left in it. If it was the wrong cup, he didn’t show it on his face, just staring at James. “The attacks happening are a furball, and this is just one part. But it’s the part we’ve got eyes on.”

“Okay. What do we do?” James asked. “Like, what are our options? We don’t have a way to effectively capture a person, we have no holding capability. *Why* would he even try to kill Yin anyway? We don’t know enough at all.” He stopped, then looked at the two men who were giving him patient looks. “So we wait for him to get where he’s going, then see what’s up?” JP clicked his tongue and cocked a finger at James, agreeing with the second person to come up with that plan. “Okay, great. But then... what? We’re just back to the same problem.” James paused. “We really need to be equipped to handle stuff like this better. No, no. I can see you already have a plan. Hit me.”

“I mean, it’s not a huge plan.” JP looked over at the desk covered in cups like he was looking for one in particular, but gave up before getting as bold as Nate had. “Follow, observe, build a profile, act if we need to to stop another *fucking car bomb*, but otherwise just work to specifically counter whatever comes next before it’s a problem.” He shrugged. “I’m sorta learning that a lot of this secret agent stuff is basically the same as dealing with people. We can be as proactive as we want, as long as we’re informed and in control.”

“Don’t... god dammit.” Nate sighed. “Fuck you, that’s close enough.” He glanced at James. “Wanted to keep you in the loop, and ask you to put together your team for if we need anything.”

“My what now?”

Nate cocked his eyebrows. “Check your fucking messages.” He said flatly. “But whatever. Pick a handful of people you trust in a crisis, and hang out here. You’re on call. Be ready to go at a moment’s notice, don’t go fuck around in the dungeons. We lost valuable time with the Alchemists, and even with Status Quo back... back then. Let’s not screw that up again.”

“Got it.” James said, already rolling over names and faces in his head. “Anything else I need to know?”

“You good?” Nate asked him abruptly.

James paused. “What?”

“You look tired. You good for this?” Nate repeated, rubbing at his own exhausted eyes.

“*You’re* the one who needs to sleep.” James told him. “I’m fine. I can keep going as long as you need me to. Hell, I was gonna tap you for the crisis team. Go get some sleep. JP can keep an eye on things here-” James blindly pointed in JP’s direction, “-shut up yes you can- and

I'll get a group together. Do you want deliver or response attitudes? No, wait, I already know the answer, it's a mix of both. Okay. I know who I'm gonna ask first, and then I'm gonna check on Yin, then go get us a bunch of magic ready to go, and see if I can do this without screwing up half the stuff going on around here. I feel up for being that clever today. Yeah. Yeah!" James clapped his hands and rubbed his palms together excitedly. "Alright. I'm on it. Thanks for the heads up." He nodded to them both, and then pivoted, ducked under one of Planner's manifested tentacles that was grabbing a folder from a desk, and took rapid long steps toward the exit.

"Is..." Nate glanced over at the pile of cups on the desk. "Is all the coffee gone because James drank all the coffee? Is that what just happened?" He asked JP.

JP just shrugged. "You've never seen this before? Nah, that's just how James is." He said. "The whole endurance stat thing fits him way too well. You push him past what he thinks he can do, and instead of getting tired, he just gets fucking hyped. It's *really* annoying when you're in high school and trying to be friends with him, but it's pretty useful now." He poked one of the empty cups. "I'm gonna go do what he said. Get some sleep. I'll put Ben on duty."

"Mmph." Nate grunted, hauling himself to his feet with a swing of his arms. "Get the rest of them out of the city." He said. "We're gonna need everyone fresh."

"Already on it." JP tapped his skulljack's wife braid. "Get with the times, old man."

"Insubordination." Nate grumbled.

He wasn't exactly wrong. But he wasn't exactly right either. And both of them split off amicably to tackle their parts of the new task. Hopefully before something else went wrong.